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ABSTRACT

Looking back over the 14-year history of Oakton Community College (OCC) with its cluster system of organization, this paper examines the distinctions between discipline-oriented organization and the cluster system, and discusses the current rationale for OCC's maintenance of this approach. First introductory material describes how the president and deans of the new institution originally established three faculty groups, each representing a cross-section of the entire curriculum, as the basis for OCC's cluster system of organization. This section also reviews efforts by the administration, faculty, and Board of Trustees to reexamine the ideas underlying the founding of the college. Next, the origins of the cluster approach at OCC are discussed, and information on the organizational structure of the college is provided. A comparison is then drawn of the traditional department/division approach and the cluster approach in terms of content, the role of faculty, and the duties and qualifications of administrative leaders. After placing the shift of focus of academic institutions from subject matter to process in a historical context, the paper contrasts the values inherent in traditional and cluster systems. Concluding comments assert that the cluster approach is still appropriate for a community college. (LAL)

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Learning Clusters and Instructional Divisions --forms of organization reflecting contrasted philosophies of education

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INTRODUCTION

Fourteen years ago, Oakton Community College was founded. Instead of organizing the new institution in the customary fashion with three or more academic divisions and one or more vocational-technical divisions, the president and deans established three faculty groups, each representing a cross-section of the entire curriculum. Over the intervening years the designation of the units, and the number of units has changed but the college has maintained what has come to be called the Oakton "cluster system" of organization.

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Reexamination

During the spring, summer, and fall of 1983, the administration, faculty, and Board of Trustees reexamined the ideas that underlay the founding of the college, and weighed the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to implement those ideas, with a view to strengthening the academic

organization of the college for the future. This process can be described in either of two ways, one of which may be of interest or value to community college theorists, and the other to community college practitioners. Here the president and one of the deans have attempted a philosophical distinction between the common and traditional discipline-centered organization and the increasingly rare approach adopted and maintained by Oakton and a very few other colleges. Elsewhere a faculty group, divided equally between advocates of the cluster system and champions of the division system, join the president in addressing the same questions practically and operationally.

ORIGINS AND STRUCTURES

It would be misleading to imply that the college's original organization grew out of a systematic philosophicalcl analysis. It did not. The roots of Oakton's experiment were nourished in a successful task force effort in another community college, which prompted faculty and administrators to ask "Why can't we work this way all the time, instead of having to do everything by departments?," in a realization that any departmental or divisional organization is more than a little abritrary and ad hoc, and in the founding president's experience in a research institute, where he found that the spark of creativity was often provided to a team of investigators by the "outside" member--the metallurgist working on a ceramics team, or the acoustical engineer working on a problem of heat-power efficiency.

In 1970, in a new college with a small number of faculty, all new to each other, and a small student body, the climate was such that an innovation like the cluster concept could be attempted. At that time between two and

three dozen "cluster-type" two-year colleges could be identified, several of them near to Oakton's Chicago suburban district.

Out of those ideas evolved an organization made up of five units, Learning Clusters One through Five, each administered by a Dean, supported by a clerical staff and a faculty assistant, housed in a series of offices near the cluster headquarters, and teaching a wide range of disciplines and programs. Cluster faculties include counseling professionals--student development faculty, in Oakton's nomenclature--and library/learning resource personnel. Dual reporting is a way of life.

Deans were selected by joint faculty-administrative committees. During 1983-1984 one deanship has been filled on an acting basis by a member of the communications faculty. Of the four present "permanent" deans, two were chosen from within the faculty, two from outside the college. Two of the four vice presidents of the college are former deans of learning clusters. These persons were chosen for general academic leadership ability, not for specialized expertise. Each takes responsibility for twenty percent, more or less, of the disciplines and programs in the college as a whole, even though some of the faculty teaching in specific disciplines are not members of the particular dean's cluster while some faculty in a cluster may not be in the disciplines for which the dean is responsible.

That is the cluster system. What is its current rationale? And what is the philosophic basis of organizating categorically, as most colleges everywhere do? And finally, what difference does it make?

COMPARISON: TRADITIONAL DIVISION/DEPARTMENT AND CLUSTER

Traditional Focus: Content

In some ways it is easier to compare a version of the cluster system to an acceptable version of a more traditional system than the other way around. The traditional system focuses on content in specialized subject matters. The organization of universities as well as of many community colleges with divisional and departmental academic organizational structures, ultimately reflects the organization of the universe, the knowledge of which the academic organization is designed, to pass on. More proximately it reflects the organization of knowledge of the world. This knowledge is hierarchical, organized largely under the structure of a series of generic to specific relationships. Thus, the subject matter discipline, a kind of ultimate species, becomes the academic organizational unit of choice for grouping faculty specialists. The focus of academic energy becomes the subject matter.

The traditional institutional lines of authority also mimic the hierarchical structure of knowledge just as the university is divided into colleges of various, and for the most part mutually exclusive, fields of knowledge, the colleges into divisions and these in turn into departments on the same or a similar basis, so the hierarchy of heads of divisions, colleges (or vice versa) and departments follows suit.

Where the traditional focus is on specialized subject matter, the theory of cluster organization focuses on the process of learning, that is, on the student as the cause of his/her own learning.

Where the traditional focus tends to aim the energy and other resources at the good and preservation of the subject matter area, its faculty, its students (considered as already committed to the subject matter), the cluster focus encourages the arraying of resources in support of the process of student learning whatever the subject matter may be. Thus, in fact, a cluster at Oakton includes not only faculty from various disciplines but also student development faculty and library/learning resource faculty. This arrangement not only accommodates the student as learner of subject material but also assists the student in the process of developing as a whole human being.

By focusing on the process of student learning rather than on the content of specialized subject mattter, the cluster tends to avoid subject matter parochialism. The physical proximity of faculty members of different subject matters and functions who together are trying to enhance student learning leads to interdisciplinary approaches. In presentations and courses the interdisciplinary innovation arises from the need to integrate into a whole the knowledge being imparted to a student who is seen as a whole from the viewpoint of the sum total of various specializations of the resource people arrayed around him or her.

The role of faculty in traditional and cluster settings differs further. In the traditional model, the emphasis on "what" is to be learned enhances the role of the teacher as the master in relation to the student, as the setter of standards to which students must aspire if they are to "master" the subject matter.

Comparing the imagery of the "traditional" to the "cluster" models, the former sets standards which students must successively reach as rungs on a ladder; the latter aims to assist students in surmounting the obstacles in a race to knowledge. The ideal cluster model attempts to augment the student-as-cause-of-self-learning by matching the student of learning style "X" with a teacher of teaching style "X." The emphasis is on enhancing student progress. Thus, the teacher is not so much the master, but more the coach or guide.

In the traditional scheme, when students fail, or fall off the ladder, it is hard to overlook: failure is well recognized. In the cluster theory, as exemplified at Oakton, forgiveness is more prevalent. Forgiveness is an extension of the focus on student learning in process. It arises from the role of coach which implies a certain rooting for the athlete to train well, to be well trained and to win, and also to be allowed to fail safely. It is part of encouraging the development of the individual student-in- process-as-learner: "go around and try it again." Neither approach is likely to have higher standards than the other because of the differences in approach. Nevertheless, while the traditional system tends to safeguard the subject matter more than the students, the cluster system can support the progress of the individual student to the neglect of consistent approaches within and across subject matter and service areas. All in all, however, the focus on the learning process moves to a concern for the student as learner.

The cluster approach alters the image or model of faculty as a whole from the traditional ideal expressed by the phrase "community of scholars." This community gains presumed commonality through the sharing of

specialized information gathered by experts in more or less narrowly defined and consequently quite different areas of knowledge or skills. This community without commonality seems to be the natural result of subject-matter primacy. In the cluster concept, the areas of specialization of the faculty are focused upon the process of learning of the student, with the hope that the faculty can fill in and support that process when gaps, breaks, or misdirection appear. The contributing faculty can, by working together with the goal of enhancing student learning, serve as consultants and guides in support of students seeking improvement in many areas of knowledge. These members of a cluster, rather than members of a discipline, comprise a "company of teachers." This phrase employs "company" in a seventeenth-century sense, as a group of individuals pooling their resources and talents to work together to seek a common goal, such as seeking a fortune in business or victory in war.

A Difference In Leadership

The duties and qualifications for division and cluster heads differ in ways that reflect the different foci of their respective purposes. Because the division is defined by the similarity of the subject matters within it, its head must also reflect subject matters within it, subject exemplifying subject-matter compatibility in his education and experience. The cluster dean must show some educational attainment at an appropriate degree level, but not necessarily in any given subject matter. Any dean is thus qualified to head any cluster. Similarly, any faculty member can be attached to any cluster. While faculty are more likely to switch clusters than are deans, deans and deanships of divisions, tied closely to the subject matter configurations of the units

they head, cannot switch any more than faculty can until they have attained proper qualifications to match themselves to another set of related subject-matter areas.

The specialized focus of head of a traditional academic subdivision is further evident in the way he carries out his duties. The hiring process for a new full-time faculty member, for example, places more emphasis on the unique needs of the division than on the total needs of the college. Selection is normally done by a committee of the discipline or division, with recommendations going to the ranking academic officer from the special interest group only, with no consultation or involvement by other faculty or division heads. Because of such practices, the barriers between fields of knowledge become more pronounced--one head knows about health programs, but the commonalities among such programs are not seen to be shared by other areas such as engineering sciences and communication arts. Thus the head of the allied health division may deny knowledge and concerns for other areas, and may be quite surprised when a commonality is perceived. The restriction of responsibility to one set of curricula leads to continued ignorance of other curricula, and thus reduces the likelihood for cooperation among the several division heads, to the detriment of the institutional mission. A clear and familiar example appears when there is a necessity for reductions in the annual budget. This necessity brings out the defensiveness among division heads, based in part on their ignorance of their peers' areas of responsibility.

The philosophy of the cluster system leads to procedures that reinforce the mutuality of the cluster heads. In the hiring process, for example, not only do faculty from other disciplines serve on the screening

committess for new full-time faculty, but the interests of the several clusters--and thus of the institution as a whole--are represented by the inclusion of more than one dean and other appropriate administrators as well. After competency is established, committees quite legitimately discuss which candidate would best fit and complement the style of the institution and of the cluster.

The administrative leader of a cluster relates to peers and to faculty in ways that differ markedly from the ways that a division administrator relates to counterparts and to divisional faculty. Because the same faculty members often report to one dean for one set of purposes, and to another dean for other purposes, the deans must consult with each other on such matters as course assignment, evaluation, career development, scheduling, and the developmental direction of the disciplines. While a typical division head might consider frequent and unavoidable consultation with his peers untenable or useless--an example of interference in each other's business--the cluster dean accepts this function as important and valuable. He or she necessarily becomes at least somewhat knowledgable in most disciplines, and knows and works with many faculty a broad cross-section of the entire college.

Cluster deans as a group become accustomed to handling issues that might be considered by some to be the private preserve of other deans. Their duties are inextricably join[illegible] by interlocking duties and the bureaucratic similarity of vocational/technical programs, in particular, which must interface with the state network in similar ways, regardless of specific content.

The similarity of elements within their scope of responsibility forms the basis of a general give and take among cluster deans, a cooperative and mutually complementary behavior that shows itself in an individual dean or in the Council of Deans, stepping in to take over some duty or to make some decision for an absent dean. This behavior, with the members of a group working as one, is often held up as an ideal of administrative behavior. It is amazing that in the world at large such behavior is as rare as we know it to be.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The shift of focus of academic institutions from subject matter to process as an organizing principle carries to academe a revolution that began with the Greeks and continued in the nineteenth century. This revolution is characterized as a shift from substance to process in many different areas of human endeavor--politics, science, and media of exchange. In their early political development, the Athenians shifted from organizing the city in tribes to demes, the heads of which were no longer tribal heads sanctioned by blood. The heads tended to be elected functionaries, elected to do a job. Greek thought moved away from substance to process as explanations of the physical world were detached from the influence of blood-related deities and came to rest on the nature of the thing--earth, air, fire, and water--itself. Eventually they defined these terms of operations; earth naturally seeks the center of the cosmos.

The Renaissance further removed explanation of physical events from the nature of the material and reduced explanation to its properties as expressed in measureable events, behaviors, or processes. In this century even the properties most pervasive in the universe, those having to do

with mass, inertia and gravity, are themselves conceptually tied up with the space and time of observation, even with the mass and motion of the whole universe.

As a last example consider the development of media of exchange. Money derived from barter, particularly from the barter of precious metals of roughly standard weights. Coinage added an arbitrary feature which in ancient as well as modern times detached the function of exchange from the intrinsic value of the metal of which the coin was made. Paper money is almost purely the vehicle of a function, a process rather than a bearer of intrinsic value. The promise of silver in return for paper has long been gone. The focus on function, on a potential process, is borne most clearly by the plastic card that triggers electronic banking and buying. The focal shift from subject matter to the process of learning and to the student as the bearer and cause of learning, as a potential learner, closely parallels the current stage in many human endeavors that have undergone the ages-long evolutionary process.

In addition, there is the much more recent recognition that those industries do better that are market or consumer oriented, that offer people substantial freedom within broad guidelines and that tend to use a participative style of management including product quality circles. The values underpinning and supported by the cluster tend to reinforce the practices of an organization aimed at excellence.

VALUES

The values inherent in the two systems are set forth in tabular summary below:

	TRADITIONAL	CLUSTER
FOCUS	Content Subject Matter	Process Learning Process of Student
ORGANIZATION AND SOME CONSEQUENCES	Divides knowledge into heirarchy of roughly genusspecies order; patterns educational organization after same order: specialized subject matter is ultimate organizational unit that defines faculty.	Brings personnel resources to bear on student and way student learns. Function rather than subject matter is primary. Cluster faculty to fit student needs.
	- promotes good of subject matter (unit, major, faculty, whatever)	- promotes good learning of student, whatever is needed
	- leads to isolation of subject matter specialist	- leads to interdisciplinary innovation
STUDENTS		
	Valued as budding versions of specialized faculty	Valued as whole human being
	To scale heights of content	Tc race over hurdles
	Teacher as master	Teacher as coach
FACULTY		
	Focused on subject matter enhancement	Focused on student learning
	Teaches subject matter	Coaches student
	Reinforces own subject	Considers interdisciplinary approach
	In community of scholars	In task force with common cause

TRADITIONAL	CLUSTER
DEAN	
Manages curriculum	Manages processes
Resembles faculty specialist	Supports process, resulting in learning of students
Promotes and defends on area, ignorant of other areas	Interacts with peers and others for good of whole
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE	
Ancient/Medieval in structure and concept	Modern/Contemporary in concept and structure

Conclusion

In actual practice, modifications have been made, and further ones are being made to correct the long-term potential negative effects of the reduction of emphasis on curricular programs. For example, although each cluster dean is responsible for both transfer and vocational faculty, only the faculty that belong to transfer curricula are distributed among the clusters, while faculty for a given vocational program are assigned to the same cluster. Nevertheless, the cluster approach still seems appropriate for a community college. That appropriateness and the match of the cluster system to the historical development of Western institutions make particularly regrettable the slow disappearance of the cluster approach.

Some innovations in non-educational institutions seem to persist, while those in education, although leaving something of their spirit, seem to succumb to traditional pressures. There are many reasons why in education traditions often survive innovation. The cluster system can, in fact, be vulnerable at the points where the traditional structure is strong. The cluster may not emphasize curriculum development of the individual

discipline. At this point it may invite the resentment of those faculty who feel neglected and those who blame the neglect on the structural lack of discipline program focus. To those at the top of the collegiate structure, the cluster system with its shared responsibility may seem to dilute accountability, the clear organization of responsibility on a single individual for person and program, that the traditional structure has. These objections are not fatal, however, since neither lack of program focus nor lack of personal accountability are necessary features of the cluster system.

It could be argued that the cluster system with its partial resemblance in theory to high tech firms employing large numbers of professionally trained people could be a most appropriate setting for self-starting, self-regulating professionals, that it could give appropriate freedom to find the best learning methods and techniques for students in a particular subject matter and appropriate resources to do so. Whether the apparent lack of definition in terms of subject matter focus and individual accountability can survive in periods of growing financial constraint and faculty discomfort is questionable.

Thus in suburban Cook County, Illinois, an administrative recommendation and a policy decision by a local college Board of Trustees are poised on the balance between two contrasted philosophies, two tendencies in our society and our educational system that have been parts of Western civilization for centuries.

In the local situation, the pendulum may swing from clusters to divisions, and all that the change implies. Somewhere, sometime, it is foreseeable that the pendulum will swing again in the other direction.

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